

# Organizing Mock Press Conferences

by Jeff Mammengo, Public Relations Coordinator

South Dakota State Historical Society

and former Information Specialist

South Dakota Department of Education and Cultural Affairs

## OBJECTIVES

---

Participating in a mock press conference can help students to:

1. explore the roles and responsibilities of a free press in a democratic society.
2. survey the responsibility of the press and individuals to monitor the activities of the government/public officials, social organizations, and political interests.<sup>1</sup>
3. analyze how the press prevents government from accumulating too much power.<sup>2</sup>
4. discover the role of the press in preserving political and economic freedoms.<sup>3</sup>
5. evaluate, analyze and critique press coverage.
6. formulate thoughtful, provocative questions.
7. recognize the importance of planning and preparation when involving the public or the media in an event.
8. develop interpersonal skills.
9. develop creative problem-solving skills.
10. practice work skills.

## METHODS

---

The following activities will contribute to a successful mock press conference:

1. Explore the role of a free press in a democratic society.
2. Study the evolution of freedom of expression.
3. Analyze a real press conference.
4. Organize the mock press conference.
5. Take it further: organize other mock forums.

---

1. This is a complex issue and relates well to many of the suggestions of the new National Standards for Civics and Education. Related issues include, among others, the purpose of the government (see the new standards, Section I) and the responsibilities of Americans (see the new standards, Section IV).

2. The new standards recommend that students gain a thorough understanding of the concepts of limited and unlimited governments (see the new standards, Section I, Letter B).

3. Many sections of the new standards are applicable here, including the relationship between limited government and political and economic freedom (see the new standards, Section I and Section V).

---

## 1. Explore the role of a free press in a democratic society.

---

Survey the historical struggle for a free press, such as the John Peter Zenger case, William Channing's speech "Tribute to the American Abolitionists" (1936), and the sedition laws and acts of 1798 and 1918, or investigate historical events such as the Watergate Scandal and the role of Washington, D.C., reporters Woodward and Bernstein or the controversial Rodney King trials. Research censorship of music lyrics and/or information on the Internet or the Supreme Court case *Hazelwood School District vs. Kuhlmeier* (1988) in which the Supreme Court decided that a principal has the right to edit a school newspaper. Use these examples to explore the following ideas and questions:

- ★ fact vs. opinion
- ★ objective reporting vs. emotional appeal
- ★ What is the role of the press in exposing scandals?
- ★ Who decides what is appropriate and inappropriate information for public consumption?
- ★ How do public officials respond to the concerns of the citizenship?
- ★ Who influences the decisions of public officials?
- ★ What role does the press play in informing citizens and limiting government?
- ★ How does informing the public limit the power of government?
- ★ How can the public influence policy-makers and legislation by using the press?
- ★ What are an individual's rights to freedom of expression?

To help students learn about the role of the media in society—how the public agenda is shaped, who/what influences reporters/the news we hear, the importance of representing both sides of the story, freedom of the press, the relationship between public opinion and the media—undertake a "Perspectives in Reporting" activity. Students can form teams that debate controversial issues such as a

current newsworthy global event, a historical event, major television speeches or a candidate's opinion of environmentalism or family values. Students can also collect clippings of editorials or discuss the effectiveness and tactics of political cartoons.

---

## 2. Study the evolution of freedom of expression.

---

Study a sample of the contributions of Milton, Locke, Franklin, and/or Jefferson to freedom of expression. Analyze the decision to televise the O.J. Simpson trial (as well as the effects of televising the trial on the verdict of the case) or the press's role in uncovering health risks associated with cigarette smoking. Use these examples to explore questions such as:

- ★ What section of the Constitution protects Americans' right to a free press or an individual's right to freedom of expression?
- ★ What is the difference between freedom of expression and advocacy of illegal action?
- ★ How can the public use the media to communicate with and influence the government and public officials? Why is this important?

---

## 3. Analyze a real press conference.

---

Explore these questions with students:

- ★ How is a press conference organized? What are its objectives? Who participates?
- ★ Which reporters and questions are most effective?
- ★ Do press reports reflect what students think happened?
- ★ Which candidates or public officials received positive/negative press coverage on which issues? Why?
- ★ How will the press conference affect Americans' attitudes toward the candidates/public officials?
- ★ Which issues discussed were given highest priority and why?

- ★ How do political goals and media coverage influence national and international events? (For example, why do you believe President Clinton sent American troops to Bosnia? Because TV coverage made it apparent that American help was desperately needed? To protect America's strategic interests? To reassert America's world-power position? To increase the President's own popularity or media coverage? For other reasons?)

---

## 4. Organize a mock press conference.

---

A mock press conference can be as simple or as elaborate as you wish. These are the basic steps:

- ★ Organize a planning committee.
- ★ Gather information and resources.
- ★ Assign role plays.
- ★ Prepare students.
- ★ Invite the audience.
- ★ Schedule a facility (if necessary).
- ★ Select the moderator.
- ★ Involve the media.
- ★ Host a reception (optional).
- ★ Keep track of event details.
- ★ Follow up.

### A. ORGANIZE A PLANNING COMMITTEE.

---

Select a group of students who will assume responsibility for organizing the different aspects of the mock press conference.

Develop and post a timeline of the activities that will lead up to your mock press conference. Include a checklist of responsibilities. This will not only help you coordinate your press conference efforts but will also help remind your volunteers of their responsibilities.

### B. GATHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES.

---

Journalists from local newspapers, TV and radio stations, and journalism departments of local colleges or universities can be wellsprings of information.

Perhaps a parent with journalism experience or a local journalist would give a talk about how press conferences are conducted or mentor your class through their mock press conference experience. Encourage students to uncover and explore the difference between professional reporting and inexperienced reporting. (How do articles in news publications differ from articles in tabloid publications? What kinds of questions do "pros" typically ask and how are they different from the questions of amateurs? Does the story present a logical case or does it attempt to appeal to your emotions?) List tactics used by the government, society, and businesses that can influence the media. Invite a public-relations person to speak to your class about how special interest groups "place" articles and why it is important to understand this process.

### C. ASSIGN ROLE-PLAYS.

---

Choose volunteers for the necessary characters (possibly by holding an essay or article contest, an academic quiz bowl competition, or a speech-writing competition). Include mock or real candidates and their relevant staff (mock press secretaries, mock advisers for specific issues), a moderator, and mock journalists to question mock or real candidates (or stand-ins for real candidates) about specific issues.

In preparation, role-players should research their positions and the relevant issues and observe real role models in action. Does the conference involve a panel or a mob of reporters? Among 40 or 50 reporters and cameramen, how do journalists get their questions answered? What types of questions do public officials answer and why? How do some candidates avoid certain questions and/or reporters? Why do they avoid these issues/people? What is the objective of the press conference: to inform, to be elected or to persuade?

Encourage students to practice their role-plays at home with family members.

### D. PREPARE STUDENTS.

---

Typically a candidate's staff members research and thoroughly brief the candidate prior to press conferences about what issues may come up, how the candidate should respond to certain questions, and how the candidate's opposition is likely to respond to the same questions. Students should inform themselves just as thoroughly for their mock press conference by:

- ★ phoning candidates' offices (phone numbers can be obtained by calling information or local party headquarters which are listed in the phone book).
- ★ creating a classroom bulletin board with clippings about candidates and issues.
- ★ calling local organizations such as the League of Women Voters.
- ★ researching a specific candidate or issue.

Encourage students to be mindful of their sources. What is the objective of the article or passage: to get the reader to vote for a candidate or make the reader sympathetic with a certain cause? Who wrote the story or may have an interest in publishing the story and why? What is the author trying to achieve? How might the author be influenced by the agenda of big businesses, social causes, and/or personal experiences? Is the story based on fact or opinion? What are the implications of the story to the people or organizations mentioned in the story? Will they try to bolster or hide similar reports? How does/can this affect the public? Why is this important?

---

#### **E. INVITE THE AUDIENCE.**

Whom do you want to invite? Students, teachers, parents, the media, other schools in your district/area, the public, local businesses, local educational organizations, local sponsors, state and local political candidates, party chairs/members (Democratic, Republican, other minor parties), or other public officials? Assign the task of sending out invitations (with an RSVP) to students.

When contacting parents, ask them (and other family members, too) if they might like to play the roles of issues experts who ask the "candidates" about specific issues such as health care, education, taxes, or city zoning. Parents might also be able to help with planning and organization, transportation, tape recording, and other logistics.

When deciding whom to invite, encourage students to explore the objectives of their mock press conference and given these objectives, whom should be invited. Do you want to inform all voters? Do you want to reach unregistered voters? Will business regulations be discussed? Tax issues? Environmental standards? Education? Under what circumstances are real press conferences usually held? Who is invited and who is excluded, and why?

---

#### **F. SCHEDULE A FACILITY.**

Depending on the number of attendees, you may or may not need to secure a facility for the event ahead of time. What capacity do you need? How many people will be attending? Is there adequate space for TV and radio reporters to maneuver their equipment? Do you need microphones or a P.A. system? Where will they be set up? Who will run them? Do you want to have microphones placed strategically throughout the room for audience questions? If you hold a reception afterward, will you use the same room?

Ask family members to help locate a suitable facility. They may have access to a hotel conference room, a business conference room, or an auditorium.

---

#### **G. SELECT THE MODERATOR.**

Selecting a good moderator (student or adult) can mean the difference between a press conference with a few hitches and one of disorganized chaos. Look for a moderator who:

- ★ can think on his or her feet.
- ★ can control discussion and timing.
- ★ is knowledgeable about the candidates and issues.
- ★ facilitates participation from all guests, not just prepared speakers.
- ★ has a sense of humor.

---

#### **H. INVOLVE THE MEDIA.**

Invite student reporters and/or real reporters to liven up the activities. If you invite the local media, consider establishing another student committee to facilitate news coverage. The committee's responsibilities might include:

- ★ answering press questions.
- ★ fulfilling requests for Mock Election information.
- ★ conducting follow-up calls to confirm media attendance.
- ★ sending thank-you letters to attendees.
- ★ ensuring that the needs (spatial, equipment, electrical) of the press are met.

Perhaps student journalists can draft a press release to send out to all local newspapers and TV and radio stations. In drafting a press release, help students understand what makes an event newsworthy and how to approach the media. Before sending press releases to media outlets, make sure students understand why certain stories are placed and others are not, and why articles are placed where they are in newspapers. (See Chapter 4: Involving Print and Electronic Media.)

Perhaps a student can videotape the mock press conference—it could be played where students and parents cast their votes in the mock election, released to the media, or edited by students into a video news release (VNR) to send out to all local media. (Contact your local TV station for further information about VNRs.)

Also consider hosting a mock election kick-off event for the media. In Indiana one year, the governor and participating mock election students jointly hosted a kick-off press conference.

---

#### **I. HOST A RECEPTION.**

If you are planning a more elaborate program, give students the responsibility of securing a facility and/or donated refreshments for a reception. They will learn many lessons that will help prepare them for the real world, including: how to coordinate the efforts of different people simultaneously, the importance of timing, how to approach individuals about a cause or organization, and the importance of following up on conversations and/or commitments.

State and/or local candidates who cannot attend the entire program may make a brief appearance or speech at your reception. Be sure that the moderator or an appointed speaker thanks your guests for participating.

---

#### **J. KEEP TRACK OF EVENT DETAILS.**

As the date for the mock press conference approaches, ask members of the student planning committee and/or other committees you have created to make a list of all the technical, logistical, and timing considerations necessary for a successful mock press conference.

Immediately preceding the event, have students check their list of nuts and bolts: Do all microphones and electrical equipment work? Will refreshments be delivered on time? Is there a clean-up crew? Are people available to help with minor emergencies (e.g., technical problems, runners for forgotten materials)? Is a back-up available if a moderator, mock candidate, or another participant doesn't show?

---

#### **K. FOLLOW UP.**

After the mock press conference, study other sources of information about the same topic: French vs. Japanese, British vs. Russian, candidate vs. candidate as well as student vs. student. How are they different? Alike? Why? What/who do students think influenced the different perspectives (historical or cultural biases, personal preferences, censorship)? How did/could the public influence the candidate's point of view?

---

### **5. Take it further: organizing other mock forums.**

---

Instead of or in addition to your mock press conference, you may wish to organize weekly talk shows based on "Face the Nation" or "Meet the Press".

Select a moderator, mock candidates and/or weekly guests, and mock journalists to debate different subjects weekly or perhaps monthly. Rotate the role-playing assignments to ensure the active participation of all students. Consider having reporters from the school newspaper report on the weekly debates (issues discussed, the outcomes) as well as the popularity of real candidates among students. Consider videotaping the event—perhaps local TV or radio stations would broadcast a segment. How do these types of talk shows influence American political culture and climate? Do they represent the conservative or liberal perspective and how can you tell? Do you consider these types of programs accurate? Unbiased? Informative?